

THE ASSOCIATION BETWEEN MINDFULNESS AND ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION IN ADULTS

Paraskevi Simou¹ & Despina Moraitou²

¹Université Jean Jaurès, France

²Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece

Abstract: Recent research indicates a positive association between mindfulness and romantic relationship satisfaction in young adults. The aim of the present study was to enrich the data about this association in adults of a broad age range by examining the relationships between specific dimensions of mindfulness and romantic relationship satisfaction. A sample of 92 Greek adults completed the *Kentucky Inventory of Mindfulness Skills* (Baer, Smith, & Allen, 2004) and the *Relationship Assessment Scale* (Hendrick, 1988). The results showed that ‘Accepting without judgment’, as a specific dimension of mindfulness, positively predicts the level of romantic relationship satisfaction in adults.

Key words: Accepting without judgment, Intimate relationships, Mindfulness, Romantic relations

Address: Despina Moraitou, PhD, Lab of Psychology, Section of Cognitive and Experimental Psychology, School of Psychology, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, 541 24 Thessaloniki, Greece. Tel.: +30-2310-201372; Fax: +30-2310-201372. E-mail: demorait@psy.auth.gr

INTRODUCTION

How could mindfulness be associated with romantic relationship satisfaction? Buddhist teachers underlined the contribution of mindfulness practices to affect management (Wachs & Cordova, 2007). This suggests that there could be an association between mindfulness and romantic relationship satisfaction, where feelings are of critical importance.

Mindfulness, as a main concept of the Buddhist philosophy and meditation appeared 2500 years ago (Dreyfus, 2011; Germer, 2004; Shapiro, Carlson, Astin, & Freedman, 2006). It refers to “an emotional balance that involves acceptance of internal experiences, affective clarity, an ability to regulate one’s emotion and moods, cognitive flexibility and a healthy approach to problems” (Hayes & Feldman, 2004, p. 257). In psychology, mindfulness was defined as present-centered awareness in which each thought, feeling, or sensation that arises in the attentional field is accepted as it is (Bishop et al., 2004). Specifically, Bishop et al. (2004) suggested a model of two components of mindfulness: first, self-regulation of attention and, second, orientation in the present experience. Self-regulation of attention comprises the ability to *sustain attention* so that thoughts and emotions can be perceived and maintained as soon as they appear in consciousness, and to *switch attention*, so that attention can be shifted from one object to another (Bishop et al., 2004). Another function of self-regulated attention is to inhibit the elaboration of thoughts, feelings and sensations, because this leads to the conservation of cognitive resources and provides the possibility to receive more information and widen our knowledge about the present experience (Bishop et al., 2004). The component of ‘orientation in the present experience’ refers to an attitude of openness towards the present experience and acceptance of feelings, thoughts and sensations which take place in the present. This openness is combined with an attitude of curiosity towards objects that appeal our attention when it is inevitably drawn away from the present experience (Bishop et al., 2004).

The present study focused on four dimensions of mindfulness as conceptualized by Baer, Smith, and Allen (2004, p. 194): *Observe*, which refers to ‘paying attention to a variety of internal and external phenomena, including body sensations, cognitions, emotions, etc.’; *describe*, which is the ‘tendency or ability to put sensations, perceptions, thoughts, emotions or experiences into words’; *act with awareness*, which is the ability to ‘focus undivided attention on the current activity’, and *accept without judgment*, which refers to ‘being nonjudgmental or nonevaluative about present-moment experience’ and to the absence of ‘self-criticism about one’s experiences’. In the early psychological studies on mindfulness, Kabat-Zinn and Welwood (as mentioned by Barnes, Brown, Krusemark, Campbell, & Rogge, 2007) suggested that

mindfulness enhances *connection and closeness* in relationships. However, few studies investigated the association between mindfulness and romantic relationship satisfaction, which is defined as ‘the positive versus negative affect experienced in a relationship that is influenced by the extent to which a partner fulfills the individual’s most important needs’ (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998, p. 359). According to these studies, mindfulness is associated with romantic relationship satisfaction because the higher the level of mindfulness is, the more satisfied people are by their intimate relationship (Kozlowski, 2013). Moreover, Saadevra, Chapman, and Rogge (2010) found that high levels of mindfulness prevent breakup of intimate relationship which is associated with high levels of attachment anxiety. It has also been shown that, after a mindfulness-based intervention with Buddhist Brahma Viharas practices in married couples, their romantic relationship satisfaction, acceptance of partner and closeness were increased, as compared to the control group that did not receive any intervention (see Lopez & Snyder, 2009). In addition, the above study found a significant increase in optimism, relaxation, spirituality and engagement in exciting self-expanding activities, which are involved in the improvement of the quality of the relationship (Lopez & Snyder, 2009). Barnes et al. (2007) examined young college students in two studies, using self-report inventories in the first one and experimental conditions in the other. The results of both studies (Barnes et al., 2007; Lopez & Snyder, 2009) confirmed the positive association between mindfulness and romantic relationship satisfaction. Furthermore, the results in the experimental part of Barnes et al.’s study (2007) indicated that young people with higher levels of mindfulness were less anxious and aggressive at the beginning of an argument. Consequently, they confronted the conflicts in the relationship experiencing lower levels of emotional stress. Wachs and Cordova (2007) examined middle-aged married couples, using self-report inventories. Their findings supported the hypothesis that mindfulness has a positive association with romantic relationship satisfaction and that people with higher levels of mindfulness tend to face their partner less judgmentally and act more responsibly towards them.

Only very recently, Lenger, Gordon, and Nguyen (2017) investigated the association between discrete dimensions – the ‘Five Facets’ of mindfulness (namely, act with awareness, describe, nonjudgment of inner experience, nonreactivity to inner experience, and observe) – and intra-individual and cross-partner relationship satisfaction in couples – parents of university students with mean participant age of 52.4 years. The results showed that each individual facet of mindfulness – except for ‘observe’ – was associated to one’s own relationship satisfaction. However, when examining all facets together in the same model, only the facet of Nonjudgment of Inner Experience, as the ability to be open and accept the present moment

experience, predicted one's own relationship satisfaction. Respectively, the facet of Nonreactivity to Inner Experience, as the ability to perceive inner experience without becoming dysregulated or trying to change it, predicted the spouse's relationship satisfaction in the all-inclusive model while no significant association was found between each individual facet and spouse's satisfaction.

However, this study examined primarily long-term married couples having adult children – university students (Lenger et al., 2017). Moreover, the conceptualization of mindfulness was slightly different from the basic model of Baer et al. (2004) in terms of the replacement of the Accept without Judgment component of their model, with the two – conceptually akin to the latter but more specific facets of Nonjudgment of Inner Experience and Nonreactivity to Inner Experience. This differentiation was adopted after the development of the initial model, based on a factor-analytic study of five independently developed self-report instruments measuring mindfulness (for more information, see Baer, Smith, Hopkins, Krietemeyer, & Toney, 2006).

The present study

The aim of the present study was to enrich recently acquired knowledge about the association between specific dimensions of mindfulness and romantic relationship satisfaction in adults, irrespective of their age and the duration of the romantic relationship, and regardless of whether they are in marriage or not. Specifically, it aimed to examine the association of each of the four mindfulness dimensions (*observe, describe, act with awareness, and accept without judgment*) as conceptualized in the initial model of Baer et al. (2004), with romantic relationship satisfaction in adults from young to older adulthood. Based on the extant literature, it was expected that the higher the level of *acceptance without judgment* would the higher the level of romantic relationship satisfaction in adults (Hypothesis 1). It was also expected that the ability to 'observe' would not be associated to romantic relationship satisfaction (Hypothesis 2). The ability to describe one's own inner experience to the other person of the romantic relationship, and the ability to focus attention on a common activity could be positively related to relationship satisfaction at a conceptual level. However, no specific hypothesis was formulated with regards to these dimensions of mindfulness ('describe' and 'act with awareness') and their relations with romantic relationship satisfaction, due to inconclusive evidence in the extant literature.

METHOD

Participants

The sample consisted of 46 female and 46 male adults ($N = 92$). Their age ranged from 29 to 84 years ($M = 51.2$, $SD = 14.72$). Of them, 15.2% were in the age range of 29 to 44 years, 60.9% were in the age range of 45 to 64 years, and 23.9% of the participants were in the age range of 65 to 84 years. Among the participants, 20.7% were of middle educational level (10-12 years of education) and 79.3% were of high educational level (years of education ≥ 13). Potential participants (17 older adults) of low educational level (0-9 years of education) were excluded from the study, as young adults with low educational level appear rarely in Greece, and thus, educational level could be a confounding variable in the study. The participants were in a relationship or marriage during at least five years, with a range from 5 to 51 years ($M = 25.31$, $SD = 14.31$). The criterion of having at least five years in the relationship was adopted so that the participants had an adequate range of experiences with their partner before they answer about the satisfaction of their relationship. Potential participants who did not fulfill this criterion were excluded of the study (24 people). At this point it should be mentioned that the variables of 'age' and 'duration of the relationship' were found to correlate highly and positively. Hence, due to sample composition, it was not possible to further proceed with an examination of the specific effects of age or age-group and duration of the romantic relationship on the association between the dimensions of mindfulness and romantic relationship satisfaction.

Instruments

Kentucky Inventory of Mindfulness Skills

The *Kentucky Inventory of Mindfulness Skills - KIMS* (Baer et al., 2004) is a self-report questionnaire developed to measure specific dimensions of mindfulness. It consists of 39 items. According to Baer et al. (2004) the KIMS measures the following four dimensions of mindfulness: Observing (items 1, 5, 9, 13, 17, 21, 25, 29, 30, 33, 37, 39), Describing (items 2, 6, 10, 14, 18, 22, 26, 34), Acting with Awareness (items 3, 7, 11, 15, 19, 23, 27, 31, 35, 38), and Accepting without Judgment' (items 4, 8, 12, 16, 20, 24, 28, 32, 36). Cronbach's alpha for each dimension in the original study was as follows: .91, .84, .83, and .87, respectively. Sample items are: "I'm good at finding the words to describe my feelings" and "I tend to do several things at once rather than

focusing on one thing at a time” (reverse-scored). Participants were required to rate each item using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (never or very rarely true) to 5 (very often or always true). The higher the mean score per dimension is, the higher the level of this aspect of mindfulness. KIMS was chosen among other mindfulness inventories because it evaluates mindfulness in daily life in the general population even without meditation experience.

The KIMS had been translated into Greek by the first author and back translated by an independent bilingual person in a preliminary study of the first author, aimed to examine the psychometric properties of the instrument. This study included 162 adult participants. The four-factor structure of KIMS was verified via the application of exploratory factor analysis to the data. Kaiser’s rule regarding eigenvalues (i.e., ≥ 1.0), and Cattell’s scree test were used to extract the appropriate number of factors for the KIMS. Items, which loaded to a factor with a value $< .40$, did not load at all, or loaded more than one factors (items 1, 5, 8, 11, 15, 17, 22, 31, 35, 37), were removed. For the final four-factor solution, the Kaiser-Meyer-Okin (KMO) was .82 and Bartlett’s test of sphericity was found statistically significant, $\chi^2(406) = 1804.36$, $p < .001$. The four factors, which explained 50.39% of the total variance, were submitted to Varimax rotation. The first factor was labeled Accepting without Judgment (eigenvalue: 4.5, eight items). Example item: “I criticize myself for having irrational or inappropriate emotions”. The second factor was labeled Describing (eigenvalue: 3.91, seven items). Example item is: “I’m good at finding the words to describe my feelings”. The third factor was labeled Observing (eigenvalue: 3.39, eight items). Example item: “When I’m walking, I deliberately notice the sensations of my body moving”. The last factor was labeled Acting with Awareness (eigenvalue: 2.81, six items). Example item: “When I’m reading, I focus all of my attention on what I’m reading”. The indices of internal consistency reliability of the four factors for the Greek sample were as follows: for the factor Accepting without Judgment Cronbach’s $\alpha = .86$, for the factor Describing Cronbach’s $\alpha = .85$, for the factor Observing Cronbach’s $\alpha = .78$, and for the factor Acting with Awareness Cronbach’s $\alpha = .74$. Hence, overall, the four-factor structure of the KIMS was replicated for the Greek adult sample, as the results verified the four factors, albeit with fewer items. The inclusion of older adults in the sample and possible cultural differences might be the reasons for these differences in the Greek version of the KIMS.

Relationship Assessment Scale

The Relationship Assessment Scale - RAS (Hendrick, 1988) was developed to measure the satisfaction from a romantic relationship. Including seven items, it is a

unifactorial instrument, with Cronbach's alpha .86. Participants answer questions such as "How well does your partner meet your needs?" and "To what extent has your relationship met your original expectations?" using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (low satisfaction) to 5 (high satisfaction). Higher scores indicate higher relationship satisfaction. The Greek version of the instrument was adapted to Greek in the preliminary study mentioned above. With regards its factorial validity, the one-factor structure of RAS was verified in an exploratory factor analysis to the data. KMO was .84 and Bartlett's test of sphericity was statistically significant, $\chi^2(21) = 279.68, p < .001$. The factor explained 53.76% (eigenvalue: 3.76) of the total variance. Cronbach's alpha was .85.

Procedure

The two questionnaires and a form of demographic data were prepared in both printed and online forms. A pilot study with ten young and ten older participants was carried out to test the potential presentation mode biases. The results showed that the answers were highly correlated. The online form was promoted via email and social media. All younger adult participants completed the questionnaires online on 'docs.google.com' but the majority of middle-aged and older adult participants filled in the printed version, as they were not familiar with computers. Specifically, the first author met the participants at municipal gymnasiums and Open Care Centers for Older Adults in Thessaloniki, where she provided orally the inventories, reading the items and noting the participants' answers. The duration of completion varied from 12 minutes to 22 minutes.

Participation in the study was voluntary. All participants provided informed consent. The authors reassured them that all procedures contributing to this work complied with the ethical standards of the relevant national and institutional committees on human experimentation and with the Helsinki Declaration of 1975, as revised in 2008.

RESULTS

Data were submitted to statistical analyses using SPSS v. 22 (IBM Corp., 2013) and EQS v. 6.1 (Bentler, 2005). After the verification of the factorial structure of the KIMS and the RAS and given the small sample size, the authors decided to proceed with the computation of observed variables which represented the four factors of the KIMS and the one factor of the RAS, respectively, by adding the scores of the items

that were found to load on each factor. Then, Pearson correlations were computed between the four dimensions of mindfulness and relationship satisfaction. In a further step, to more accurately examine the ability of each dimensions of mindfulness to predict self-reported romantic relationship satisfaction, path analysis was applied to the data.

The association between mindfulness and romantic relationship satisfaction

As shown in Table 1, the two dimensions of mindfulness, namely, Accepting without Judgment and Acting with Awareness, had a statistically significant positive correlation with Romantic Relationship Satisfaction. This means that the higher the levels of the two dimensions of mindfulness are, the higher the level of satisfaction from the romantic relationship is. In regards the interrelationships between mindfulness dimensions, Accepting without Judgment had a significant positive correlation with Acting with Awareness, but importantly, had a negative correlation with Observing and no significant correlation with the dimension of Describing. However, the dimension of Describing had another two significant correlations moderate and positive with Observing and Acting with Awareness (see Table 1).

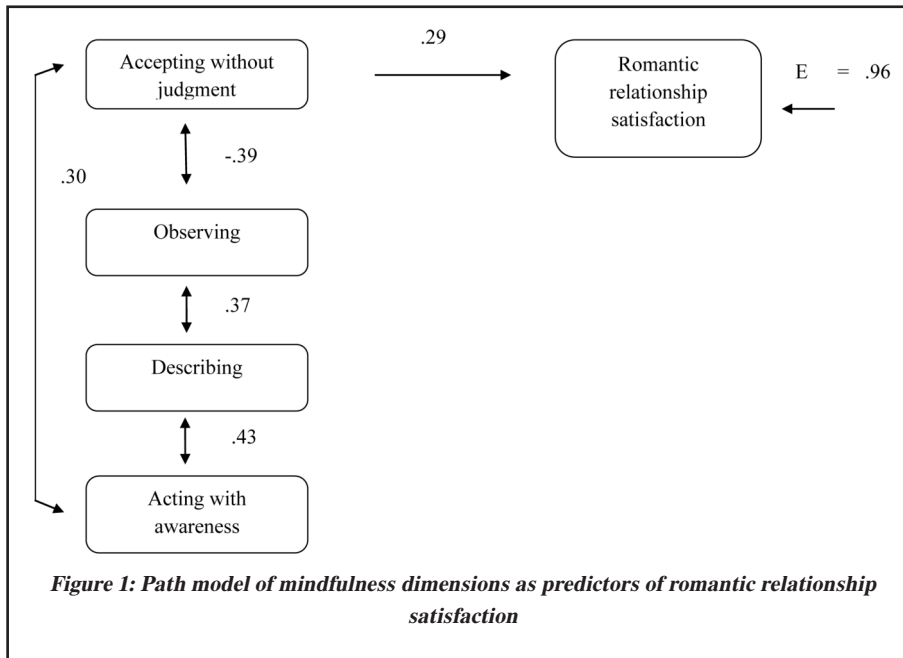
Table 1. Pearson's correlations between the dimensions of mindfulness and romantic relationship satisfaction

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1. Accepting without judgment	1				
2. Describing	.08	1			
3. Observing	-.36**	.35**	1		
4. Acting with awareness	.32**	.46**	.24	1	
5. Romantic relationship satisfaction	.29**	.04	.01	.22*	1

Note: * = $p < .05$; ** = $p < .01$.

To take a broader view of the pattern of relationships between the dimensions of mindfulness and romantic relationship satisfaction, path analysis was subsequently performed (EQS v. 6.1; Bentler, 2005). In regards the indices of path model fit, χ^2 was used along with the root mean squared error of approximation (RMSEA); a rule of thumb is that $RMSEA \leq .05$ indicates close approximate model fit, while $.06 < RMSEA \leq .08$ indicates acceptable error in the approximate model fit. The Comparative Fit Index (CFI) was also used; CFI values greater than .95 indicate good fit of the researcher's model (Brown, 2006; Kline, 2005).

Path analysis was performed on covariance matrices using Maximum Likelihood estimation procedure. Where necessary, the Wald test was used to test the need for the estimated parameters included in a path model and to suggest a more restricted model.



As shown in Figure 1, the path model that was confirmed, $\chi^2(5, 92) = 4.45, p > .05$, CFI = 1.00, SRMR = .05, RMSEA = .00 (90% CI: .00-.14), showed that Accepting without Judgment positively predicted Romantic Relationship Satisfaction. Moreover, Acting with Awareness, Observing and Describing were associated with Accepting without Judgment. Specifically, Acting with Awareness positively correlated with Accepting without Judgment and Describing. On the contrary, Observing had a negative correlation with Accepting without Judgment but a positive one with Describing.

DISCUSSION

According to the Hypothesis 1, the mindfulness dimension Accepting without Judgment would positively relate to romantic relationship satisfaction in adults, irrespective of their age and the duration of the relationship they have. Based on the findings, both Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2 according to which the dimension 'Observe' would not

be associated to romantic relationship satisfaction, were confirmed. Specifically, only Accepting without Judgment out of the four dimensions of mindfulness was found to directly predict romantic relationship satisfaction. It seems that when one accepts the present experience in a non-judgmental way, has this kind of acceptance towards their partner too. If this happens, acceptance without judging leads to fewer conflicts and, in consequence, to a happier romantic relationship. In the same vein, Barnes et al. (2007), who investigated the mechanisms that make mindful person experience more satisfaction in the romantic relationship, found that mindfulness was related to positive changes in love and commitment, while was negatively related to verbal aggression, negativity, and conflict. Finally, this finding is supported by a recent study of Lenger et al. (2017) who found that 'nonjudgment of inner experience' is a facet of mindfulness that significantly predicts relationship satisfaction.

In regards Acting with Awareness, the path analysis showed that this dimension did not predict relationship satisfaction directly. However, it may somehow contribute to it via its relationship to Accepting without Judgment. The potential connection could be explained by the conceptualization of awareness itself. According to Bishop et al. (2004), awareness refers to the ability of perceiving thoughts and emotions as soon as they arise in consciousness. Such ability may help the person to express the positive or negative feelings to their partner and discuss about them rather than 'ignore' them until they explode and then lead to a fight with the partner. Moreover, awareness as self-regulated attention (Bishop et al., 2004) promotes inhibition of thoughts and elaboration of affects, so that the person uses their cognitive resources to receive more objective information about an experience. In this way, the person avoids overanalyzing negative situations, something that could lead to negative inferences about their partner's thoughts, affect, and behavior, and, ultimately, to conflicts. In other words, the person has the potential to perceive and process multiple aspects of the relationship and not only the negative ones. Similarly, the positive relation between Acting with Awareness and Accepting without Judgment can be explained by not overanalyzing and receiving objectively all aspects of the experience. When one has an objective picture of the experience it is less likely that they judge the partner, because they are aware of both the negative and positive aspects of the situation.

In the path model there was also a positive association between Acting with Awareness and Describing. Acting with Awareness includes the perception of multiple aspects of the experience, as was mentioned above, and this may be advanced by description skills. On the other hand, Describing requires self-regulated attention so that the person stays focused on the present and is able to describe it. The positive relation between Describing and Observing could be expected as the description of experiences presupposes the observation of them.

What is worth noting in the findings of the path model is the negative relation between Accepting without Judgment and Observing. Although Shapiro et al. (2006) suggested that ‘attitude’ refers to careful observation of the experiences and acceptance of them with openness and, hence, without judgment, it seems that these two facets of mindfulness are not parts of the same mechanism. This suggestion is in line with the original inter-scale correlations of the KIMS (Baer et al., 2004). Specifically, in the first study that examined the psychometric properties of the KIMS, Baer et al. (2004) found that seven out of 12 items of the Observation factor in the original version of KIMS loaded negatively to the factor of Accepting without Judgment, and the two factors had a significant negative correlation ($r = -.14$). Baer et al. (2004) conjectured that in people with low meditation experience, attending experiences is related to judging them. We propose that another possible explanation could be that the detailed observation of the internal and external experiences in the romantic relationship may lead a partner to overthinking and eventually to judgmental comments against the other partner. In support of such arguments, Baer et al. (2006) found that the ‘observing’ facet of another instrument developed to measure the Five Facets of Mindfulness, namely the Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire (FFMQ, Baer et al., 2006) had positive associations with disassociation, absent-mindedness and thought suppression, all of which were negatively associated with the other mindfulness facets (Kimmes, Durtschi, & Fincham, 2017).

However, in general, it seems that mindfulness, especially as ‘accepting without judgment’ but also via the association of this dimension with ‘acting with awareness’ and ‘describing’, could help adult couples to avoid negativity because of too much elaboration of negative experiences, discuss constructively with the partner to solve a problem, and eventually have a happier relationship and feel more satisfied with it.

The above assumptions imply that a couple’s levels of ‘accepting without judgment’ could predict the level of satisfaction the partners would experience in a relationship. It is possible that by increasing its level would increase relationship satisfaction, as well as an optimization of the romantic relationship quality. However, the opposite could also be true. That is, having a satisfying romantic relationship leads to lower negative judgment of the partner and higher acceptance. Future research should clarify the direction of the relation between mindfulness dimensions and romantic relation satisfaction. That is, caution is in order in regards the direction of the relationship between mindfulness dimensions and romantic relation satisfaction and causal inferences should be avoided. Moreover, the data of this study were self-reports. This means that adults with higher levels of mindfulness perceive, and hence evaluate, their relationship satisfaction to be higher, or that people with higher levels of satisfaction develop higher levels of certain mindfulness dimensions. Experimental or intervention research could enlighten these issues.

Limitations of the present study and further research

The main limitation of the present study is its exploratory nature. The study was based on a convenience sample of participants and on self-report instruments, and therefore the findings are essentially tentative. Replication of these findings in a more representative sample of adults, by using objective measures of mindfulness and relationship satisfaction, if possible, as well as experimental designs or/and field observation, are needed.

Conclusion

Despite the limitations, the results of the present study tend to support the claim and confirm previous studies in adult samples according to which mindfulness has a positive association with romantic relationship satisfaction. More specifically, the study showed the importance of a specific dimension of mindfulness, namely 'accepting without judgment' in the prediction of relationship satisfaction in adults of a broad age-range, from younger to older ones.

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